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ABSTRACT

This article addresses the multicultural aspect of Central Asia in response to the discussion on diversity in U.S. classrooms. Many areas of the world are more diverse than the U.S., and these areas experience successes and failures with many of the same issues the U.S. is currently struggling with. Comparing the U.S. diversity debate with similar discussions in other areas of the world may provide an additional perspective on the issues of cultural identity, the search for common causes, and inter-ethnic cooperation. The article gives an overview of Central Asia's multiculturalism and discusses the following issues: "The Soviet Influence on Culture"; "Historical Claims and Present Predicaments"; "Language Rights"; "Affirmative Action"; and "Women and 'Family Values.'" (Contains numerous references.) (BB)

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Multicultural Central Asia

Eric D. Boyle

Multiculturalism in Perspective

Over the past several years, the discussion on how to address America's diversity in the classroom has intensified. US educators have been unable to strike a balance between celebrating our nation's many cultural components and establishing a common experience that we all can agree upon. The USA is a unique country in many ways, but it is not the only country struggling with the issues of diversity and identity. In fact, many areas of the world are more diverse than the US, and they have had their own successes and failures with many of the same issues we discuss. Comparing the US diversity debate with similar discussions in other areas of the world may provide an additional perspective on the issues of cultural identity, the search for common causes, and inter-ethnic cooperation. A vivid example illustrating the complexities of cultural diversity is an area of the world called Central Asia.

Celebrating Central Asia's Diversity

The notion that the Soviet Union was a monolithic, totalitarian state is a myth. Spanning one seventh of the earth's landmass, the USSR was made up of numerous cultures and languages, ranging from Paleo-Siberian and Buddhist peoples in the east to people of Finnish and Jewish descent in the west. Of course, Russians were the largest ethnic group, but at the end of the 1980's their proportion had declined to just about 50 percent of the total Soviet population. In some major geographic regions of the country, including Central Asia, Russians were a minority.

What is "Central Asia" and where is it? Central Asia is located in the heart of the Eurasian landmass, between China and the Caspian Sea. Today it usually refers to five independent countries (former republics of the USSR) whose total land mass covers over 3.9 million square kilometers, slightly more than 40% of the area of the US. It is bordered by the lofty Pamir Mountains in the south and the vast Russian taiga in the north. The people of Central Asia are a diverse mix of cultures, languages, and religions. In addition to the titular nationalities (i.e. the nationalities whose name is reflected in the titles of the republics: the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Tajiks, and Turkmens), there are also ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, Koreans, and Germans scattered across the steppes, sands and mountains of Central Asia. In addition, there are over 50 other ethnic groups living there that many of us in America have rarely heard of, such as the Uighurs, Dungans, Chechens, Ingush, and Azeris.

The diversity present in Central Asia today has resulted from centuries of contacts between many different peoples from Eurasia. Central Asia has been the home of many different peoples who represent a large number of languages and cultures. In the 8th century, Muslim armies invaded the sedentary oases of Central Asia and encouraged the spread of Islam among the indigenous Iranian peoples. In the 13th Century, Chinggis Khan's armies rampaged through the Central Asian steppes, bringing with them thousands of Turkic nomads who contributed their languages and traditions to the culture and history of the region. The process of Islamization and the blending of Turkic and Iranian practices have developed into important features of Central Asia's diverse cultural framework.

Each with a unique cultural heritage, the dozens of different ethnic groups in Central Asia today share a history of over a hundred years of Russian, and then Soviet, domination. The native inhabitants of Central Asia are people of Turkic and Persian (Iranian) origin, culturally connected to the Turks, Iranians, and Mongolians. Russia's interaction with the local peoples in the 18th and 19th was the Central Asians' first contact with an industrialized European society. Russian tsarist forces established colonial rule over much of the territory in the middle and late 19th Century, but it was not until the middle of the 1920s, about seven years after the Bolshevik Revolution, that the territories of Bukhara and Khiva fell directly under Russian power. In the 1920s and 30s, the Soviet rulers gave the republics of Central Asia most of their present-day borders. In creating the units defined in those years, the Soviet leadership did not intend to reinforce national consciousness. Nevertheless, the borders prepared the ground for cultural and linguistic engineering that did much to shape the nationalities present in Central Asia today. In the 1930s and 1940s, Stalin's paranoid policies brought many exiles from the European part of the USSR to Central Asia, sometimes depositing entire villages in the middle of the steppes. After World War II, the Central Asian republics were subject to an intense period of industrialization and russification, which changed the inhabitants' ways of life permanently.

The forces of nature have also influenced the people of Central Asia. Central Asia is a vivid example of how peoples' habitats affect their cultures and attitudes. The Uzbeks settled in the fertile valleys of Central Asia, and therefore have a rich tradition of cooking elaborate meals. The Kyrgyz are historically a nomadic, mountain-dwelling people. Many of their modern traditions originate from this type of isolated, pastoral lifestyle, which was probably linked to the Kyrgyz lavish treatment of guests from afar.

Central Asia is an arid region, but the people who live there are also dependent on agricultural

production. Therefore, water is a precious commodity for the entire region. Diversion of the Aral Sea's tributaries for crop irrigation has caused the world's fourth-largest inland lake to lose over 80% of its volume. Sometimes, water and irrigated land are so scarce and so difficult to tap that people are willing to fight for them. In 1990, riots broke out in the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz, ostensibly over rights to land suitable for farming.

Multiculturalism gets Complicated

This incident in 1990 is not the only example of recent violence in the region. Following independence, a civil war broke out in Tajikistan, with different interests fighting for power. Unfortunately, it is too easy for Western media to portray such events as the culmination of decades or even centuries of hatred or the savage struggle for power among different "tribal" interests. The conflict in Tajikistan actually has much more complicated origins and so the road to a peaceful settlement is extremely difficult.

Beyond the bloodshed, Central Asia faces many of the same diversity issues that America faces today. However, the circumstance and approaches to bridge culture gaps are quite different. To many in the area, the idea of multiculturalism resounds with echoes of "internationalism" or the "merging of nations," the Soviet policies of forcing the USSR's various nationalities to accept an ideology. The following is a brief summary of some of the points where celebration of diversity collides with present-day realities.

The Soviet Influence on Culture: One of the major debates among Central Asians concerns the effect of Soviet power on cultural development in the region. On the one hand, the Soviet leadership subjected the peoples of Central Asia to forced collectivization of agriculture, starvation, environmental degradation, russification, and tight censorship of all media. On the other hand, the regime arguably helped modernize Central Asia by industrializing the region and providing universal education. Literacy rates skyrocketed from below 10% before 1917 to a proclaimed 99% in the 1980s. Although the Russian language was strongly promoted from above, the Soviet government allowed and even encouraged books in the native languages to be published and distributed to wider audiences. Central Asia produced world-renowned scholars, authors, and athletes who may have not had the chance to develop their skills without the Soviet educational system. In the present day, people from Central Asia are still debating the positive and negative effects of 70 years of Soviet rule.

Historical Claims and Present Political Predicaments: Respect for cultures includes an element of appreciation for their histories. Historical claims to certain territories, however, do not always mirror the current political landscape. Central Asia was carved up into five "homelands" which had little semblance to the political and territorial situation in Central Asia before 1917. In fact, most specialists agree that Soviet power purposefully designed complicated and arbitrary borders in an attempt to "divide and conquer." Some claim that the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand (in present-day Uzbekistan) are historically Tajik, and thus should belong in Tajikistan. Southern Kyrgyzstan is heavily populated by people of Uzbek heritage. Some Russians have laid claims on territories in northern Kazakhstan. It is difficult to match historical and modern territories, especially when history is subject to multiple interpretations. Some analysts fear that Central Asia may turn into another Yugoslavia, while others worry that Russia may want re-establish itself as a "peacekeeper" for the region.

Language Rights: Recent debates about bilingual education in America have attempted to balance the social utility of a common language with the social responsibility of equal opportunity, regardless of native language. In Central Asia, the issues are even more urgent. Over 80 different languages are spoken by groups living in Central Asia. As part of the Soviet Union, the republics of Central Asia were subject to both subtle and overt pressure to adopt Russian as a common language, often at the expense of the local languages. Until the 1980s, Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, hosted only one school where Kyrgyz was the language of instruction. Local scholars were concerned that the local languages would die under increased pressure from Moscow. Many protested for the right to learn and use their own languages in the 1980s. However, at that time, a large share of the best educated Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Turkmens, and Uzbeks already spoke Russian better than their "native" language, and it was difficult in each republic to find consensus concerning the "right" language of instruction. Now that the Central Asian states are independent, the problem has become even more complex. All of the new states have adopted local languages as the "official" or "state" language, even though much of the population speaks a different language, especially Russian, at home, work, and in school.

Affirmative Action: Parallel to its emphasis on the Russian language, the Soviet regime at times favored people of Russian ethnic background for professional and administrative jobs. Whether enticed by the new opportunities on the frontier or encouraged by higher officials worried about increasing birth rates among the local population, Russians immigrated to Central Asia by the millions, becoming the largest minority in the region. Many of them held important technical and administrative jobs. Some claim that the ethnic Russians discriminated against the local population, while others emphasize the Russian presence as a major asset to regional development. After independence, the relationship with the ethnic Russians remains ambiguous. Many of those who have lived their entire lives jn Central Asia have left the region, leaving some sectors of the economy without the experts that helped manage them.

Women and "Family Values": Some have argued that the Soviet Union did much to promote women's rights in the region. Soviet doctrine espoused equality between the sexes and trained many women professionals, though mostly in education and medicine. Under independence and economic reform, many women have lost their professional jobs. Some have been forced into more traditional roles, minding the children at home or working in the informal sector of the economy. Others face a double burden, having simultaneously to supplement or replace their husband's income and maintain the household without their husband's support. The role of women changed under Soviet times and is evolving today. Many debate the role that women should play at a time when society as a whole attempts to balance traditional cultural roots with the demands of a modern society.

Like all discussions about celebrating diversity, the issues confronting Central Asian multiculturalism spring from different notions of identity. Having achieved independence, the countries of Central Asia face the challenge of reaching a consensus about who they are as peoples or nations and what their goals are. Educators and political activists in America experience a similar debate that has no easy answers. Accepting and understanding the differences in people's self-definitions elsewhere will not eliminate all the misunderstandings among different groups of people at home. However, by comparing the issues in our discussions with those in other societies, we can place our own diversity in a more global context.

Notes on Spelling

When studying, researching, or teaching about Central Asia, it is important to bear in mind that there are many variations in spelling the names of the peoples and countries, depending on the transliteration and the time period in question. Different databases and catalogues may have different spellings. Some of the spellings include: Kazakstan, Kazakhstan, Kazakh SSR, Kirghizia, Kyrgyz SSR, Kyrgyzstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Tadzhikistan, Tadjikistan, Tadzhik SSR, Turkmenia, Turkmenistan, Turkmen SSR, Uzbekistan, Ozbekistan, and Uzbek SSR.

Resources

The following resources provide additional information on the different cultures of Central Asia:

A. The *Then-and-Now* Series (1993), from Lerner Publications, 241 First Ave N, Minneapolis, MN, 55401-1607, tel: (607) 332-3344. Recommended for ages 9-12.
- *Kazakhstan, Then and Now*
- *Kyrgyzstan, Then and Now*
- *Tajikistan, Then and Now*
- *Turkmenistan, Then and Now*
- *Uzbekistan, Then and Now*

B. The *Former Soviet States* Series, from the Millbrook Press, 2 Old New Milford Road, Brookfield, CT, 06804, tel: (203) 740-2220. Recommended for ages 9-12.
- *The Central Asian States: Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan*
- *Kazakhstan*

C. For older readers (ages 13 – 18)

Culturegrams, published David Kennedy Center for International Studies at Brigham Young University. Brief bulletins about all the countries of the world, updated yearly. For ordering information, call (800) 528-6279, or visit the website at http://ucs.byu.edu/kenncent/publications/

Curtis, Glenn, ed., *Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan : Country Studies, 1st ed.*, Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, 1997.

Hunter, Shireen, *Central Asia Since Independence*, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996.

King, John et al., *Central Asia: A Lonely Planet Survival Kit*, Oakland: Lonely Planet Publications, 1996.

D. Video

Central Asia: Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, Lonely Planet Productions, April 1997.

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